

DOCTOR AND NURSE

Remarks to the First Class of Graduates from the
Training School for Nurses of the
Johns Hopkins Hospital

BY WILLIAM OSLER, M. D.

Physician-in-Chief to the Hospital

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Mr. President, Members of the Board of Trustees, Members of the Graduating Class—Ladies and Gentlemen:—

There are individuals—doctors and nurses, for example—whose very existence is a constant reminder of our frailties; and considering the notoriously irritating character of such people, I often wonder that the world deals so gently with them. The parson never arouses these feelings—no matter what may be his views on celestial geography, his cloth and tie speak of dim possibilities, not of the grim realities conjured up by the names of the persons just mentioned. The lawyer never worries us—in this way. We can imagine in the future a social condition in which neither divinity nor law shall

have a place—when all shall be Friends and each one a Priest, when the Meek shall possess the earth; but we cannot picture a time when Birth and Life and Death shall be separated from the grizzly troop, which we dread so much, and which is ever associated in our minds with “physician and nurse.”

Dread! Yes, but mercifully for us in a vague and misty way. In the shadows cast by the turrets of the temple of oblivion, towards which we travel, we play, like schoolboys, regardless of what awaits us in the vale of years beneath. Suffering and disease are ever before us, but life is very pleasant; and the motto of the world, when well, is “forward with the dance.” Fondly imagining that we are in a Happy Valley, we deal with ourselves as the King did with Gautama, and hide away everything that suggests our fate. Perhaps we are wise. Who knows? Mercifully, the tragedy of life though seen is not realized. It is so close that we lose all sense of its proportions. And better so; for, as a great philosopher has said, “if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow, or the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”

With many, however, it is a wilful blindness, a sort of fool’s paradise, not destroyed by a thought, but by the stern exigencies of life, when the “min-

isters of human fate" drag us, or—worse still—those near and dear to us, upon the stage. Then, we become acutely conscious of the great drama of human suffering, and of those inevitable stage accessories—doctor and nurse.

If, Members of the graduating class, the medical profession, composed chiefly of men, has absorbed a larger share of attention and regard, you have, at least, the satisfaction of feeling that yours is the older, and, as older, the more honorable, calling. In one of the lost books of Solomon, a touching picture is given of Eve, then an early grandmother, bending over the little Enoch, and showing Mahala how to soothe his sufferings and to allay his pains. Woman, "the link among the days," and so trained in a bitter school, has, in successive generations, played the part of Mahala to the little Enoch, of Elaine to the wounded Lancelot. It seems a far cry from the plain of Mesopotamia and the lists of Camelot to the Johns Hopkins Hospital, but the spirit which makes this scene possible is the same, tempered through the ages, by the benign influence of Christianity. Many among the ancients had risen to the ideas of forgiveness of enemies, of patience under wrong doing, and even of the brotherhood of man; but the spirit of Love only received its incarnation with the ever memorable reply to the ever memorable question, *Who is my neighbor?*—a

reply which has changed the attitude of the world. Nowhere in ancient history, sacred or profane, do we find pictures of devoted heroism in woman such as dot the annals of the Catholic Church, or such as can be paralleled in our own century. Tender maternal affection, touching filial piety were there; but the spirit abroad was that of Deborah not Rizpah, of Jael not Dorcas.

In the gradual division of labor, by which civilization has emerged from barbarism, the doctor and the nurse have been evolved, as useful accessories in the incessant warfare in which man is engaged. The battle is ever against him, for the worst foes are in his own household.

Collectively, man, the race, with passions and ambitions, weaknesses and vanities, has made, by barbaric inhumanity, countless thousands mourn; and even to-day, when philosophers would have us believe his thoughts have widened, he is ready as of old to shut the gates of mercy, and to let loose the dogs of war. It was in one of these attacks of race-mania that your profession, until then unsettled and ill-defined, took, under Florence Nightengale—ever blessed be her name—its modern position.

Individually, man, the unit, the microcosm, fast bound in chains of atavism, inheriting not alone feature and form, but legacies of feeble will and strong desires, taints of blood and brain—what

wonder that many, sore let and hindered in running the race, fall by the way, and need a shelter in which to recruit or to die; a hospital, in which there shall be no harsh comments on conduct, but only, so far as is possible, love and peace and rest. Here, we learn to scan gently our brother man, and—chief test of charity in your sex—still gentler sister woman; judging not, asking no questions, but meting out to all alike a hospitality worthy of the *Hôtel Dieu*, and deeming ourselves honored in being allowed to act as its dispensers. Here, too, are daily before our eyes the problems which have ever perplexed the human mind; problems not presented in the dead abstract of books, but in the living concrete of some poor fellow in his last round, fighting a brave fight, but sadly weighted, and going to his account “unhousel’d, disappointed, unaneled, no reckoning made.” As we whisper to each other over his bed that the battle is decided and Euthanasia alone remains, have I not heard in reply to that muttered proverb, so often on the lips of the physician, “the fathers have eaten sour grapes,” your answer, in clear accents,—the comforting words of the prayer of Stephen?

But our work would be much restricted were it not for man’s outside adversary—Nature, the great Moloch, which exacts a frightful tax of human blood, sparing neither young nor old; taking the child from the cradle, the mother from her babe,

and the father from the family. Is it strange that man, unable to dissociate a personal element from such work, has incarnated an evil principle—a devil? If we have now so far outgrown this idea as to hesitate to suggest, in seasons of epidemic peril, that “it is for our sins we suffer,”—when we know the drainage is bad; if we no longer mock the heart prostrate in the grief of loss with the words “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth”—when we know the milk should have been sterilized—if, I say, we have, in a measure become, emancipated from such teachings, we have not yet risen to a true conception of Nature. Cruel, in the sense of being inexorable, she may be called, but we can no more upbraid her laws than we can those of the state, which are a terror only to evil doers; and so it is with the greater laws of Nature. The pity is that we do not know them all; in our ignorance we err daily, and pay dearly a blood penalty. Fortunately it is now a great and growing function of the medical profession to search out the laws about epidemics, and these outside enemies of man, and to teach to you, the public—dull, stupid pupils you are, too, as a rule—the ways of Nature, that you may walk therein and prosper.

It would be interesting, members of the graduating class, to cast your horoscopes. To do so collectively you would not like; to do so individually—I dare not; but it is safe to predict

certain things of you, as a whole. You will be better women for the life which you have led here. All women are good, naturally; the bad are made so by men. But what I mean by "better women" is that the eyes of your souls have been opened, the range of your sympathies has been widened, and your characters have been moulded by the events in which you have been participators during the past two years.

Practically there should be for each of you a busy, useful, and happy life; more you cannot expect; a greater blessing the world cannot bestow. Busy you shall certainly be, as the demand is great, both in private and public, for women with your training. Useful your lives shall be, as you will care for those who cannot care for themselves, and who need about them, in the day of tribulation, gentle hands and tender hearts. And happy lives shall be yours, because busy and useful; having been initiated into two of the three mysteries of the Great Secret—that happiness lies in the absorption in some vocation which satisfies the soul; that we are here to add what we can *to*, not to get what we can *from*, Life; and the third,—is still a mystery, which you may or may not learn hereafter.

Of the aims of the Founder and Trustees of this Hospital, one has been carried out during the past two years, in which, in the wards and dispensaries, over 33,000 sick received aid; another is accom-

plished to-day in the granting of these diplomas, and we await the completion of these aims in the establishment of the medical school.

Let me congratulate you as the first of the goodly bands which, year by year, shall distribute far and wide the blessings of this Institution.

I may express, Mr. President, on behalf of your medical staff, our gratification at the success of the Training School and our appreciation of the character of the work that has been done—in every respect in keeping with the high standard expected by the profession, the city and the country. I have been a hospital physician long enough to have watched the various steps in the evolution of the trained nurse, and can speak of the value of the great change which has been made. I can assure you, Sir, and the Members of the Board of Trustees, that the sick, for whose welfare you have been, through your deputies, directly responsible, have received at the hands of these, your graduates, every consideration, kindness and attention,—not that perfunctory, routine care which strains the very quality of mercy, but an interested devotion worthy of the spirit which we hope shall always characterize the work of this place.

And let me assure you, members of the graduating class, that although you go away out of our lives and that of the Institution, you still belong to us, and your welfare is our happiness. In

worries and anxieties of mind or of body it will be a privilege and a pleasure to help you.

And finally, remember what we are—useful supernumeraries in the battle, simply stage accessories in the Drama, playing minor, but essential parts at the exits and entrances, or picking up, here and there, a strutter, who may have tripped upon the stage.

You have been much by the dark river—so near to us all—and have seen so many embark, that you now know the old boatman too well to dread him ; so

“ When the Angel of the darker Drink
At last shall find you by the river brink,
And offering his cup, invite your soul
Forth to your lips to quaff—you shall not shrink ”—

And why should you ? Your passport shall be the blessing of Him in whose footsteps you have trodden, unto whose sick you have ministered, and for whose children you have cared.